24 pages ₹ 15 ISSN 0972-3366 FORTNIGHTLY Vol. 16 No.22 Issue Serial # 380 facebook.com/milligazette www.milligazette.com 16-30 November 2015

THE MILLI GAZETTE
INDIAN MUSLIMS' LEADING ENGLISH NEWSPAPER SINCE 2000

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Bihar rejects politics of hate

Abhay Kumar

Until deep into the night before November 8, the day of declaration of results for the 2015 Bihar assembly elections, I received several calls and was visited by many worrying faces. 'Will the Mahagathbandhan [Grand Alliance] win?' asked Mohammad Umar Farooque, who hails from Sitamarhi (Bihar) and currently teaches economics at Delhi University. Fear crept up in the hearts of Farooque and many others after a few exit-poll predictions gave the BJP-led alliance a clear majority.

Since I toured many parts of Bihar for over two weeks during these polls, my views on the results of Bihar elections were sought. They were anxious that I should reassure them that the BJP was going to lose.

In the early hours of the next morning when the initial trend showed the BJP having a lead over the Grand Alliance, the heartbeats of my friend Gautam Buddha Rai of JNU increased. But the bubbles of BJP's chances of winning elections soon burst as the trailing Mahagathbandhan surged ahead and suddenly went past the magic figure.

'The psychological trauma is finally over', clapped 25-year-old Wasim from Begusarai (Bihar), welcoming the surge of the Mahagathbandhan. Since the morning he remained glued to TV in Delhi.

At the end of the day when the dust settled, the final result clearly gave a two-thirds majority to JD-U-RJD-Congress-led Grand Alliance which won as many as 178 seats out of 243, while the BJP-led NDA bit the dust, winning mere 58 seats.

However, the biggest gainer of Bihar polls was Lalu Prasad Yadav-led RJD which won 80 seats, while Nitish-led JD-U bagged 71 seats. Having struck an alliance with Nitish-Lalu paid rich dividends to the Congress as the Grand Old Party of India won 27 seats out of 41 it had contested.

Unlike the tirade of the BJP and a large section of upper-caste dominated media against Lalu for being the architect of "jungle raj", he walked away with man of the match award. While his role in consolidating backwards and minority votes in favour of the Grand Alliance was crucial, he was also at the forefront of taking on the BJP.

Srikant, director of Jagjivan Ram Institute of Parliamentary Studies and Political Research (Patna), had told me in an interview in Patna before the counting of polls that the "aggressive campaign" of the BJP, particularly its jibe against Lalu, had consolidated a large section of backwards against it. 'Calling Lalu's rule as a jungle raj is informed by one's social location in fovour of feudal forces. For example, those who are opposed to backwards would call it jungle raj,' asserted Srikant.

Seen in retrospect, the aggressive use of communal and anti-lower castes cards undoubtedly turned out to be detrimental to the BJP, bringing down the number of its MLAs from 91 in the previous assembly to 53 out of 157 it contested. Jitan Ram Manjhi's HAM, Ram Vilas Paswan's LJP and Upendra Kushwaha's RSLD, which were on BJP's boat, too sank as none of them could reach anywhere near the double digit figure.

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With this humiliating defeat, Narendra Modi -who aggressively campaigned in Bihar and resorted to communal speeches, which did not befit the stature of a Prime Minister -has lost the carefully crafted halo around him. Unlike his own rhetoric of development to all, his government has been working in favour of the rich and corporates, while rabid Hindutva leaders have been given protection, their anti-minority and anti-Dalit venom created an atmosphere of intolerance, fear and hate.

Notwithstanding BJP's claim that development is its "core agenda", BJP leaders in Bihar, since the beginning of the electoral campaign, were trying to create communal polarization. For example, BJP President Amit Shah-weeks before his widely-condemned remarks, that crackers would be burst in Pakistan if the BJP would lose Bihar elections, had raised the issue of beef in a Samastipur rally on October 10.

Launching an attack on Lalu for his remarks that Hindus also ate beef, Amit Shah said, what kind of gau-palak (cow-breeder) Lalu is that he had made no difference between beef and mutton. He then went on to say that if the BJP came to power, it would enforce a complete ban on killing cows and its breeds.

From the first phase till the last, beef remained on the plate of the BJP in Seemanchal. On the eve of the final phase of elections, a BJP advertisement was printed in several newspapers showing a woman hugging a cow with a bold headline questioning Nitish's "silence" over the issue of cow slaughter and saying, 'Mr. Chief Minister you maintained silence while your ally kept insulting the cow, worshiped by every Indian.'

While the Election Commission took exception to these advertisements, the BJP, unmindful of such warnings, continued to work for polarising voters on religious lines particularly in Seemanchal which has a considerable Muslim population.

Such politics of hate by the BJP leaders created an atmosphere of fear among Muslims. During my interactions with Muslims in many parts of Bihar, they raised serious concern about BJP's attempt to create frenzy over the beef issue. 'The BJP wants to derive unfair benefit from this," said Shabbir Ahmad from Samastipur. Many others charged the BJP leaders with pursuing "double-standards" in the beef issue. "Ninety per cent of the people in beef business are Hindus. The BJP wants to fool people. Earlier too, the same party did the same thing in the name of temple', Ahmad added.

When asked what Muslims felt after the recent incident of lynching at Dadri, Haji Mohmmad Azim Ansari from Samastipur said that no untoward incident could take place in Samastipur as Muslims maintained patience (sabr) in the wake of any provocation, while the administration of Bihar "kept the situation under control".

However, they added that politics over beef had led to creating suspicion among Hindus. "One of the fallouts of the politicisation of beef is that a section of Hindus is turning suspicious when food items are offered to them by Muslims," rued Haji Mohammad Azim.

But, as the results indicated, a majority of the voters in Bihar elections, both Muslims and non-Muslims, have slammed BJP's politics of cow and beef. 'Cow, instead of giving milk [victory to the BJP] has delivered the party dung [defeat]', was one such reaction of people on social media.

Yet another issue that backfired on BJP was reservation. While the Grand Alliance leaders, particularly Lalu, exposed the BJP for being anti-lower castes by quoting the statement of RSS Chief Mohan Bhagwat about the need to review reservations, the BJP, sensing the consolidation of lower castes in favour of the Grand Alliance, tried to give it a religious colour to arrest lower castes mobilising against it.

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The Naked Emperor

Grabbing the Delhi throne with only 31% of the votes cast in the 2014 general elections, Narendrabhai lost his head. He started behaving like a medieval monarch. He imported minions and trusted babus from Gujarat and thought he will run India single-handedly just as he ran Gujarat for 13 years. With his limited education and exposure, he thought he could rule this vast and great country for ever. In no time, he sidelined big wigs in his own party, including the "iron man" who had shielded him after the 2002 pogroms. He reduced Union ministers to the status of peons and mighty bureaucrats to babus. The megalomaniac started spending more time on world safaris than his own country. Very soon he tasted the might of the parliament when he failed to move the land bill he had promised his corporate backers. Delhi voters junked him early this year, yet in his arrogance he failed to read the writing on the wall. He planned to grab all states one by one - Bihar, then West Bengal, UP and Assam relying on his chum Amit's deceit and cunning... But the politically-alert people of Bihar have put paid his grandiose dreams. His reckless march has been abruptly stopped just like the destructive Yatra of his erstwhile godfather was checked in 1990, also in Bihar. His dangerous communal politics and fraudulent development rhetoric stand exposed. The Emperor is naked. It is time for the secular leaders to rise to the occasion and bury the ugly politics of hate for ever.

Zafarul-Islam Khan

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Killing, crackdown as PM visits the Valley

Afsana Rashid, Srinagar

A youth, Gowhar Ahmad Dar, was killed after CRPF fired tear gas shell on demonstrators against curbs placed to foil a 'Million March' called by Hurriyat (G) led by Syed Ali Shah Geelani to counter Prime Minister Narendra Modi's rally in Srinagar on November 7. A student of engineering at SSM College here, Dar, 22, was hit by teargas shell in the head at Zainakote, on the outskirts of Srinagar city and later succumbed to his injuries in Sher-e-Kashmir Institute of Medical Sciences (SKIMS) Soura. The situation turned critical as the news of his death spread. People took to streets, examinations were postponed, separatists called for a shutdown and restrictions were imposed by the government in several areas of the city on November 8.

Geelani has called for a march to TRC grounds, which was barely a few meters from Sher-e-Kashmir stadium where the Prime Minister held a rally. This was the Prime Minister's first visit to Kashmir after PDP and BJP formed the government in the state in March this year. The March supported by all separatists was foiled by the government and severe restrictions were put in place to thwart any rally or disruption. The separatists were either detained or placed under house arrest.

Even if security was beefed up across the Valley ahead of Prime Minister's visit, 13 CRPF men were injured in a grenade blast at Ikhwan hotel here on November 5 evening. Militant organization, Hizb-ul-Mujahideen claimed responsibility for the attack.

Terming the March a historic occasion Hurriyat (G) chairman, October 30, appealed to people to come out from every village, town and city to send a clear message to the world that Kashmiris are firm on their demand for a plebiscite and they want to decide their future through the Scotland type referendum process.He said the Prime Minister can't buy off the demand of freedom for Kashmiris even if he would announce Rs 10 lakh crore financial package instead of 01 lakh crore. "If India gives us our right to self-determination, we will donate Rs 10 lakh crore instead of one lakh crore for its poor and needy." The Prime Minister is expected to announce a development package to the tune of Rs one lakh crore, including financial assistance for rehabilitation of 2014-flood victims of the state.

While reviewing preparations for the March, Geelani November 1, said that it would refresh the memories of mass gatherings of the year 2008 and appealed to youth to use social networking sites for publicity of the programme. He appealed to Kashmiris living in foreign countries to organize small gatherings at their respective places in support of the march on that day.

Following an appeal by Hurriyat (G) chairman to promote the March on social networking websites, pages in support of the march were created since October 31. Closely monitoring social networking sites, police on November 2 said that pages in support of the march would be blocked and strict action would be initiated against those found involved in "promoting any chalo call on their social networking pages."

Police on November 2 said that Hurriyat (G) rally is aimed at creating law and order problem and it won't allow any parallel march on that day.Deputy Commissioner Srinagar on November 3 served a notice to Geelani asking him to refrain from taking out any rally during the Prime Minister's visit. He has also been asked to approach district authorities for permission in case he planned to take out any rally.

Terming the crackdown on separatists as "frustration and acceptance of defeat by the government" Geelani, on November 2 said that the state government on directions of the Home Ministry started a process of arrests, raids and search operations in every nook and corner of the state to foil the March. "We are not scared of arrests and restrictions and we will go ahead with the March, come what may."

Supporting the 'Million March' call JKLF chairman Mohammad Yasin Malik, October 31, said that his party intended to hold a parallel rally at historic Lal Chowk on November 7. "Since a rally was already announced by Hurriyat (G), the party decided to make it a success."Malik appealed to people to observe civil curfew and complete shutdown on the day if the March was not allowed. Malik was lodged in Kothibagh police station, November 2.

Hurriyat (M) chairman Mirwaiz Umar Farooq too supported the March and appealed to people to participate in 'Solidarity Day' to commemorate the anniversary of Jammu martyrs of November 6, 1947at Jamia Masjid on November 6. He was however, placed under house detention, November 4 and restrictions were imposed in several areas of old Srinagar city on November 6.

"Through the 'Million March' we will send a strong message across the world that Kashmiris have offered sacrifices for the noble cause of securing their fundamental right to self-determination promised to them,"said Mirwaiz.

Dr Abdullah Gaznavi, Lashkar-e-Toiba's spokesperson, while quoting its chief, Mehboob Shah, November 1 said, "People must ensure the success of the rally to give a message that they want an end to the illegal occupation of Kashmir." He urged Kashmirs to take a cue from people of Afghanistan where "occupation forces were forced to leave the country."

Appealing to people to participate in the March, Democratic Freedom Party chairman Shabir Ahmad Shah, October 31 said, "We didn't offer sacrifices of 5 lakh people for economic packages but for right to self-determination."

Meanwhile, to ensure participation of people and party members in Prime Minister's rally several BJP leaders campaigned in Srinagar, media-reports said. The party's National General Secretary Ram Madhav, November 1, said that Prime Minister was coming to Kashmir with a message of peace. Even PDP spokesperson Dr. Mehboob Beg, November 1, said that the party is working hard to make the rally a grand success.

Terming Modi's visit as a "turning point in the history of state" Chief Minister Mufti Mohammad Sayeed, during a public meeting here on November 2, said that people have pinned great expectations from the visit. "The Prime Minister is a visionary leader and has his eyes fixed on the overall development of the state. I see this visit as an opportunity for history to repeat itself."

Meanwhile, opposition National Conference leader Omar Abdullah November 6 alleged that the state government used official machinery for Modi's rally, which was "shameless". The Prime Minister announced a developmental-economic package of Rs 80,000 crore for the state.

Supreme Court on Art. 370

The Apex Court has said that only Parliament can take a call on scrapping Article 370 that accords special autonomous status to Jammu and Kashmir. Prior to this, the Jammu &Kashmir High Court had observed that Article 370 is a "permanent" provision of the Constitution. The Supreme Court November 1 refused to entertain a Public Interest Litigation (PIL) that wanted Article 370 removed from the Constitution.The case was listed before the Apex Court on November 3. The Court had asked the state government on August 18 to file its objections by November 3 but the state government hasn't filed the same as on date.

The J&K High Court had in October observed that notwithstanding its title "temporary provision" Article 370 is a permanent provision of the Constitution. Earlier, a division bench of the High Court headed by Justice Hasnain Massodi in a 60-page judgment had observed that notwithstanding its title "temporary provision" Article 370 has assumed permanence in Constitution and the feature cannot be abrogated, repealed or amended as the mechanism provided under Clause (3) of Article 370 is no more available. In terms of Article 370, the court said, Parliament's legislative power over the State is primarily confined to three subjects mentioned in the Instruments of accession - Defence, Foreign Affairs and Communications.

Legal experts here opined that it is the consistent view of the Supreme Court that no judicial review can be entertained about the constitutional provisions in existence between the state and the Centre."Political issues are being regularly taken before courts so far as state of Jammu and Kashmir is concerned. There appears to be a concerted effort to somehow dilute the special constitutional position of Jammu and Kashmir state", observed Zaffar A Shah, noted attorney, November 1.

Let commander killed

The "most wanted" Lashkar-e-Toiba (LeT) commander, Abdur Rehman alias Abu Qasim was killed in an encounter in south Kashmir's Khandaypora village in Kulgam distriction October 30. His killing not only triggered protests and clashes in the area but people from three districts in south Kashmir sought his body for burial in their respective places. Police however, considered it a "big dent to militancy". A resident of Bhalwalpur in Pakistan, he carried a bounty of Rs 20 lakh on his head. Police on October 30 said that Qasim was on the "radar of security agencies since he sneaked into this side from Pakistan five years ago.Police collected information on him in bits and pieces which finally resulted in his killing." Addressing media, Inspector General of Police (IGP) Kashmir, Syed Javid Mujtaba Gillani,October 30,said on specific information about the presence of militants in Khandaypora, a joint cordon and search operation by police and army was launched in the village. Qasim died in a brief gunfight in the village. Gillani added Qasim was active for the past five years and was the mastermind of Udhampur attack being investigated by National Investigating Agency and was also involved in the attack at Bandipore that left Assistant Sub-Inspector and counter-insurgency expert, Mohammad Altaf Dar, dead. Even Srinagar based Army spokesperson termed Qasim's killing a "major success". ❑

Continued from page 1

To communalise the issue of reservation, none other than the Prime Minister came forward. Addressing a public rally in Madhubani in the last phase of the elections, he made a wild allegation that Nitish and Lalu want a review of reservations so as to give part of it to Muslims.

Besides using Prime Minister to spread such a false propaganda, the BJP went on to print advertisements in local newspapers about "quota conspiracy", accusing Lalu and Nitish of snatching Dalits and Backwards of their share of reservations and giving it to a minority (Muslims).

Behind such strategies, BJP's game was to paint Muslims as the "other" or the "enemy" of society and mobilise Hindus on religious lines. But the roots of social justice and Mandal politics in Bihar were so deep that the majority of people in the state could easily sense BJP's tricks.

During my interactions with a large section of lower castes and Dalits, whom the BJP was eying as potential voters, said that they would vote for the Grand Alliance as the BJP serves upper castes interests. For examples, a large section of Dalits in Laxmanpur Bathe, also called Bathe, a small village on the river Son in Arwal, that hit the national headlines in the winter of 1997 when 58 Dalits and lower caste people were killed allegedly by upper caste-Bhumihar militia Ranvir Sena in a single night-said that they would vote for the Grand Alliance. 'If BJP wins, Babhans (upper caste Bhumihars) and [upper caste] Rajputs would become sher (lions),' said Mritunjay Kumar. Like Mritunjay, noted author Srikant called the BJP as a Brahminical party. Besides the issues of beef and reservations, price-rise and cuts in welfare schemes by the Modi Government had a negative impact on BJP's prospects of winning elections in Bihar. For example, some passengers, most of them women who were sitting on a three-wheeler from Khagol to Phulwari Sharif near Patna, expressed their anger against the Modi Government for price rise. 'Dal (pulses) have become out of our reach', rued one woman, addressing the driver who, in turn, asked them not to vote for the BJP as it would, if it was voted to power, further cause price rise.

It is logical that the issue of price rise might have played a role in determining the voting behaviour of a large section of women. According to the election commission data in the 2015 Bihar polls, 60.57 per cent of women cast their votes as against only 53.41 per cent male voters.

Given that, the leaders of the Grand Alliance too raised the issue of price rise in their rallies. Lalu, addressing a public rally in Mahua on October 21, said, when the issue of price-rise was raised, Modi replied that the price of petrol had come down. 'What if the price of petrol had come down and that of pulses has gone up. Are you going to drink petrol?' wondered Lalu.

Similarly, Nitish in his rally in Punpun in Phulwari Sharif on October 19, said 'BJP ki dal galne wali nahin hai'. Nitish used the local idiom of 'dal nahin galegi' which means that one would not succeed despite making all kinds of efforts. He further said that the prices of dal had shot up to Rs. 200 a kg during Modi regime. 'People are somehow surviving (guzara) with bhaat-tarkari (rice and vegetables) and mandbhat [rice and rice water],' added the chief minister.

With the Grand Alliance wining two-thirds majority in Bihar, the myth of Modi being "invincible" and "unstoppable" has been demolished second time within a year after the BJP's defeat in Delhi Assembly Elections. The victory of Nitish has given a boost to a move for greater solidarity of opposition parties against Modi Government. This has also lent credibility to the protest of hundreds of intellectuals, artists, writers, key personalities from the world of cinema, literature and culture against the rising intolerance in the country, whom the ruling establishment is criticizing for spoiling the reputation of the country. Besides, the dominance of Modi and BJP President Amit Shah in the BJP would be increasingly questioned by other fractions in the party.

However, the splendid victory to JD-U, RJD and Congress parties does not mean that the challenges they face are over. The real test of the Grand Alliance begins now as it has to live up to the expectation of this huge mandate in Bihar as well as all over the country.

During my interactions in Bihar, I gathered that while Backwards, Dalits and Muslims were determined to vote for the Grand Alliance, they also had grievances against the forces of social justice that have ruled the state for the last 25 years. Among such complainants were two widows, a Dalit and a Muslim, from Zahidpur in Phulwari Sharif constituency, who had come to attend Nitish's rally at Punpun High School. Middle-aged Ishrat Parwin, whose deceased husband used to sell eggs, works as a maid servant. She expressed her grievances, 'I do not have any rozgar (employment). I also do not have a BPL card, house or a toilet.' Similarly, a Dalit widow Meena Devi said that she did not have a hand-pump nor a toilet in her house.

But interestingly, their grievances against the government did not come in the way of their choice of the incumbent chief minister Nitish Kumar. 'I will vote for Nitish', said Meena Devi, while Ishrat asserted that if she had come to listen to Nitish, she would also vote for him.

While the victory of the Grand Alliance is welcomed by the forces of secularism and social justice, the Grand Alliance's real test lies in their ability to reach out to likes of Meena Devi and Ishrat Prawin.

Abhay Kumar covered Bihar elections for The Milli Gazette.

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